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First record of an Arctic Tern for Nebraska

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On 20 September 2000, I arrived at Lake Minatare in Scotts Bluff County after the passage of a strong cold front the day before. At 11:36 a.m., I noticed two distant *Sterna* flying east of the lighthouse. Although the distance was great, I could see that one tern was a juvenile Forster's Tern while the other tern was clearly a different species. Even at a distance, I thought I could see a white cheek, a darker gray belly, and pale upperwings, all indications that the bird was an adult Arctic Tern. I then drove to the lighthouse and soon found the two terns flying along the north shore of the lake where they eventually landed amongst a small flock of Franklin's and Ring-billed Gulls. I was able to approach to within 10 meters of the birds and take several photographs. The Arctic Tern remained at this location until I left the area at 12:40 p.m. and was still there several hours later (Helen Hughsen, pers. comm.).

While it perched, I was able to study the bird extensively and compare it to the juvenile Forster's Tern. I estimated that the bird was 10-15% smaller than the Forster's Tern. Another notable difference was the leg length. I estimated the legs were no more than half the length of those of the Forster's Tern. The bill was no more than 75% of the length of the Forster's Tern bill and was a deep red color with no black tip. The cap was black with a few white flecks on the forehead and crown. The dark cap included the eye. The cheek was white and contrasted with the dark gray underparts. When perched, the bird's mantle and upperwings were dark gray, except for a hint of a dark carpal bar. The carpal bar was not evident when the bird was in flight. I studied the wing pattern carefully when the bird flushed. The upperwings were an even gray color with no darkening in the primaries. The underwings were white with narrow dark tips to the primaries, creating a dark trailing edge to the

underwing. The tail was deeply forked with dark color along the outer edge of the outer rectrices. On the basis of the white flecks on the crown and faint hint of a dark carpal bar, I concluded the bird was an adult that was just beginning the molt to basic plumage. According to Olsen and Larsson (1995), this molting is a bit unusual since most Arctic Terns do not molt until they reach the wintering grounds. However, a small percentage of adult Arctic Terns begin to molt during migration and would be expected to match the plumage of this bird at this date and latitude. The combination of bill shape and color, contrasting white cheek, dark gray belly, short legs, pale upperwings, and narrow black tips to the undersides of the primaries eliminates other species of *Sterna*, especially Common Tern.

This sighting denotes the first record of an Arctic Tern for Nebraska. The species is exceedingly rare in the western Great Plains with a total of 18 records from Montana, Wyoming, South Dakota, and Colorado. Records generally decline in the southern Great Plains. I believe that the occurrence of an Arctic Tern in Nebraska was overdue, although I thought the first record would probably be in late spring at Lake McConaughy or some other large reservoir. Future records of this species can be expected in Nebraska, especially in late spring (mid-May through early June) and in fall (best from late July through early October).

Literature Cited

Olsen, K. M., and H. Larsson. 1995. Terns of Europe and North America. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.